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ABSTRACT

This study examined the interaction among parental conflict, self-efficacy, and friendship satisfaction levels. It was predicted that self-efficacy would be a mediating variable between parental conflict and outcomes, specifically ability to have successful friendships. Participants included 235 undergraduate students from a small Midwestern college. Parental conflict was measured by Straus' Father-Mother Conflict Tactics Scale. Self-efficacy was evaluated using the Friendship Self-Efficacy Scale created specifically for use in this study. Friendship satisfaction was evaluated using the McGill Friendship Questionnaire-Respondent's Affection. As predicted, results indicated that the type of parental conflict to which a child is exposed relates to the ability to have successful friendship later in life. More specifically, reasoning conflict was positively related to friendship satisfaction. In addition, it was found that a young adult's friendship self-efficacy predicted friendship satisfaction above and beyond the effects of the demographic variables and conflict levels. Implications for mental health professionals are discussed. (Contains 14 references and 2 tables.) (Author)

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Running head: THE ROLE OF PARENTAL CONFLICT

The Role of Parental Conflict and Self-Efficacy in Friendship Satisfaction

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Abstract

This study examined the interaction among parental conflict, self-efficacy, and friendship satisfaction levels. It was predicted that self-efficacy would be a mediating variable between parental conflict and outcomes, specifically ability to have successful friendships. Participants included 235 undergraduate students from a small Midwestern college. Parental conflict was measured by Straus' Father-Mother Conflict Tactics Scale. Self-efficacy was evaluated using the Friendship Self-Efficacy Scale created specifically for use in this study. Friendship satisfaction was evaluated using the McGill Friendship Questionnaire-Respondent's Affection. As predicted, results indicated that the type of parental conflict to which a child is exposed relates to the ability to have successful friendships later in life. More specifically, reasoning conflict was positively related to friendship satisfaction. In addition, it was found that a young adult's friendship self-efficacy predicted friendship satisfaction above and beyond the effects of the demographic variables and conflict levels. Implications for mental health professionals are discussed.

The Role of Parental Conflict and Self-Efficacy in Friendship Satisfaction

With divorce rates in the United States reaching levels of sixty percent and affecting over one million children every year, psychologists have begun focusing on how divorce affects both the parents and their children (Neilson, 1999). Only forty percent of college students' parents are still married by the time the students begin their freshman year of college (Nielsen, 1999). Research has suggested that rather than the divorce itself, the actual process of the divorce may have long-term effects on the child in terms of their general psychological well-being (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999). Other variables, however, may mediate the relationship between the process of divorce and psychological outcome (Black & Pedro-Carroll, 1997). One variable that has been found to play a mediating role between divorce and psychological outcome is the level of parental conflict prior to and during the divorce (Amato, Spencer-Loomis, & Booth, 1995). Although studies have examined the roles of parental conflict, the *types* of conflict that may relate to psychological outcomes remain unclear. In addition, previous research has yet to examine other potential mediating variables between parental conflict and psychological outcomes. One variable that has received little attention is a child's self-efficacy.

It is reasonable to assume that self-efficacy may play a role in the relationship between parental conflict experienced by the child and psychological outcomes later in life since Bandura (1986) notes that individuals receive a sense of self-efficacy vicariously through their comparisons and interactions with others. Thus, a child who witnesses high levels of certain types of parental conflict, may obtain a lowered sense of self-efficacy for his or her own friendships since they have witnessed relationship conflict between his or her parents. Further, if one were to examine the relationship between self-efficacy and friendship satisfaction, one should examine friendship self-efficacy as opposed to a more general measure of self-efficacy.

In addition to Bandura's self-efficacy research, other studies have shown that self-efficacy is affected by past experiences and emotional arousal over long periods of time, which are both factors of prolonged parental conflict (Anderson & Betz, 2001).

The current study is designed to examine two hypotheses: (1) Does the type of parental conflict to which a child is exposed relate to psychological outcomes later in life, in this case the ability to have successful friendships? (2) What role does self-efficacy play in the relationship between divorce, parental conflict, and psychological outcomes later in life? It was predicted that self-efficacy would be a mediating variable between parental conflict and outcomes, specifically the ability to have successful friendships.

Methods

Participants

Participants included two groups of undergraduate students recruited from a small Midwestern college. Subjects were recruited by posting sign-up sheets on the "Human Subjects Pool" board located in the Psychology Department and by passing sign-up sheets in introductory psychology classes. Credit was offered for those students enrolled in a class where participation in an experiment was accepted. Participants were asked to meet in a designated classroom where they signed a consent form, completed questionnaires, and were debriefed. A total of 235 students participated. Ninety-seven students had parents who were divorced (33 males, 64 females), and one hundred thirty-eight students (46 males, 92 females) were from families where the parents had not been divorced.

Materials & Procedure

A demographics survey contained questions about the individual and the family background such as gender and marital status of the parents. The parental conflict level was

measured using Straus' Father-Mother Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus & Gelles, 1992). The conflict scale consists of 16 questions total that the individual was asked to rate on a one to five scale. The questionnaire was filled out separately for both mothers and fathers. This self-report measure consists of three subscales: reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical aggression. The reasoning scale (α = .64) measures parents' addressing disagreements without using verbal or physical abuse. The lower internal consistency of this subscale may be due to it only having 3 items. The verbal aggression (α = .77) subscale can be described as verbal acts that may hurt their partner. The subscale consists of six items evaluated for each parent. The physical aggression subscale (α = .78), which measures the nonverbal acts that elevate to a violent level, consists of five questions for each parent.

A Friendship Self-Efficacy Scale for College Students was designed to measure perceived competence in maintaining long-term friendships was developed by the authors for use in the current study. The questions were placed on a five-point Likert scale (-2 = strongly disagree to +2 = strongly agree). The final scale consisted of 6 items (α =. 83).

Friendship satisfaction levels were assessed with the McGill Friendship Questionnaire-Respondent's Affection (MFQ-RA) and served as outcome variables. The scale contained two subscales: positive feelings (α = .96) and friendship satisfaction (α = .92). The subscales positively correlated, $r(251) = .83$, $p<.01$. The validity factor of social desirability did not predict the scores either on the positive feelings subscale, $r(82) = -.07$, $p<.05$, or on the satisfaction subscale $r(82) = -.01$, $p<.05$ (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999).

Results

Initially, a 17-item questionnaire (given to 131 undergraduates) was developed to assess how confident an individual was in maintaining a long-term friendship (friendship self-efficacy).

A principal components factor analysis was performed on the 17-item scale and a clear one-factor solution emerged that consisted of 6 items ($\alpha = .83$). Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations, and factor loadings of the final 6-item solution.

Hypothesis one stated that the type of parental conflict to which a child is exposed relates to the ability to have successful friendships later in life. Hierarchical multiple regressions were performed for each outcome variable (overall friendship satisfaction, positive feelings, satisfaction, and opinion of friendship). The demographic variables, gender and parental marital status, were entered as block one. Parental conflict levels were entered as block two. Friendship self-efficacy was entered as block three. Significant results showed that the type of conflict that a child is exposed to predicted overall friendship satisfaction ($R^2 = .158$, $p<.001$). Specifically, reasoning conflict predicted overall friendship satisfaction ($\beta = .38$, $p<.001$) and positive feelings subscale ($\beta = .38$, $p<.001$).

To examine the possible mediating role of self-efficacy, hierarchical multiple regressions were again performed for each outcome variable (see Table 2 for R-Squared values, and β Coefficients).

Overall, the demographic variables were significant predictors of Overall Friendship Satisfaction, $F(2, 232) = 3.295$, $p<.05$. Specifically, gender was a significant predictor of Friendship Satisfaction ($\beta = .14$, $p<.05$). As predicted, conflict levels predicted above and beyond the effects of the demographic variables, $F(5, 229) = 8.608$, $p<.001$. Specifically, the scores on the reasoning conflict subscale predicted overall friendship satisfaction ($\beta = .37$, $p<.001$). Additionally, friendship self-efficacy predicted friendship satisfaction above and beyond conflict levels and demographic variables, $F(7, 227) = 13.755$, $p<.001$. Specifically, the trust subscale of the friendship self-efficacy scale predicts overall friendship satisfaction ($\beta = .38$,

$p<.001$). A similar pattern of results was obtained when each of the satisfaction subscales were used as dependent variables (See Table 2).

Discussion

As predicted, conflict was found to be a predictor of overall friendship satisfaction. This supports previous research that suggests the divorce itself is not the primary factor that impacts the child (Wolchik, et al., 2000). More specifically, results from a study conducted by Amato, Spencer-Loomis, and Booth (1995) suggest that the marital status is not what affects the child; rather, the actual level of conflict that the parents engage in is the main effect upon the child's psychological adaptation to the divorce itself. Similarly, findings from the present study support research showing that a child's exposure to conflict levels is related to his or her psychological well-being (Jekielek, 1998). The type of conflict (specifically, reasoning conflict) was found to be a positive significant predictor of friendship satisfaction. Thus, the present study adds to this research by showing type of conflict also plays an important role in psychological adjustment.

It was predicted that self-efficacy would be a mediating variable between parental conflict and the ability to have successful friendships. Friendship self-efficacy was found to be the most significant predictor for friendship satisfaction, predicting above and beyond parental marital status, sex, and parental conflict. Finding this link adds to the findings of Chung and Elias (1996) in their study of self-efficacy and social behaviors. Their results illustrated that lower self-efficacy was related to lower social competence. Also, the findings are supported by the research conducted by Sandler, Tein, Mehta, Wolchik and Ayers (2000) which shows that higher self-efficacy leads to lower levels of social anxiety.

Most importantly, this study adds to the literature that specific self-efficacy affects specific successes, achievements or satisfactions. Other links from self-efficacy to successes

have been found for optimism (Schweizer, 2000), academic achievement (Smith & Fouad, 1999), and occupational choice (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli, 2001). As links continue to be found, it becomes more evident how important an individual's self-efficacy is for different aspects of life.

The limitations on the study provided ideas for future research possibilities. The study could be strengthened by adding a more diverse group of students. Diversity could be increased by using participants from state schools as well as the ones already gathered from the private institution; this would also increase the sample size. By increasing sample size and diversity, the differences in the conflict levels would also most likely increase.

In addition to future research opportunities, this research has implications for mental health professionals dealing with children coping with parental divorce or simply parental conflict. This research has highlighted that a child's satisfaction with intimate friendships may be affected by specific types of parental conflict. Also, professionals may wish to explore the child's self-efficacy as an important factor in his or her well-being.

Table 1

Alphas, Item Means, Standard Deviations, and Factor Loadings for the Long-Term Friendship Self-Efficacy Scale

Items	α	Mean	SD	Factor Loading
Long Term Friendship Self-Efficacy Scale	.83	26.57	3.71	
I am confident that___ wants to spend time with me.		4.50	0.72	.71
I am confident that ___ is always sincere when he/she tells me something.		4.44	0.68	.76
I can always trust ___ to be there when I need him/her.		4.50	0.74	.72
I have faith in my ability to work out any problems with ___.		4.50	0.77	.65
I have confidence that ___and I still will be friends in three years.		4.59	0.70	.69
I believe that I can always be honest with ___.		4.51	0.82	.50

Table 2
Hierarchical Multiple Regressions of Demographics, Conflict Tactics, Friendship Self-Efficacy, and the McGill Friendship Scale

Predictors	Overall Friendship Satisfaction	Friendship: Positive Feelings	Friendship: Satisfaction
Demographics			
Gender	.14*	.20**	.48
Divorce	.08	.04	.06
Incremental R^2	.03*	.04**	.01
Conflict			
Physical Aggression	-.02	-.01	-.08
Verbal Aggression	-.04	-.02	-.04
Reasoning	.38***	.38***	.11
Incremental R^2	.13***	.13***	.02
Friendship Self-Efficacy	.38***	.26**	.55***
Incremental R^2	.14***	.07***	.29***
Overall R^2	**.30*** **	**.24*** **	**.32*** **

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

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